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ABSTRACT

Examined were teacher perceptions of the classroom behavior of socially rejected, popular, and average children at prekindergarten, primary and later elementary grade levels. Teachers' personal preferences for children who differed in sociometric status were also investigated, as were the behavioral determinants of these preferences. Subjects were 160 prekindergarten through fifth-grade children, including 78 boys and 82 girls, who were drawn from all seven classrooms in a laboratory elementary school in northern Maryland. Two measures were used to assess children's sociometric status: a friendship nomination measure on which children indicated the names of their three best friends in the classroom, and a sociometric rating scale on which children rated how much they liked to play with each of their classmates. Classroom teachers completed the Teacher-Child Rating Scale, a measure of social-emotional adjustment, and rated their personal preference, for each child in their class. The findings, which support previous research on the behavioral bases of peer status, suggest that teachers may have different personal expectations for younger children than for older ones. For younger children, teacher preference was more closely related to children's interpersonal relationship skills; whereas for older children, teacher preference was more influenced by the children's school and social coping skills. (RH)

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Peer Status, Classroom Behavior, and Teacher Preference: A Developmental Study of Popular, Average, and Rejected Children

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Peer Status, Classroom Behavior, and Teacher Preference: A Developmental Study of Popular, Average, and Rejected Children

Although there is an extensive body of literature on the behavioral basis of peer status in the classroom, (see Asher, Oden, & Gottman, 1977 and Asher & Renshaw, 1981 for reviews), few studies have addressed this topic from a developmental perspective. For the most part, studies of this kind have been conducted with either preschool or upper elementary school children and have rarely involved longitudinal or cross-sectional comparisons across this age range. Also, studies of young children have typically involved different behavioral measures than have been used in studies of older children. One purpose of the present research was to examine teacher perceptions of the classroom behavior of socially rejected versus popular and average-status children at the prekindergarten-primary level as compared to the later elementary level. Rejected children were identified, using sociometric classification procedures developed in previous research with upper elementary children. Such classification studies emphasize the need to distinguish rejected children from children who are unpopular but not actively rejected by their peers (i.e., neglected children), since the two types of children exhibit different behavioral patterns (e.g., Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982). These two status groups have often been confounded in previous investigations, particularly those conducted with younger children.

A second purpose of the present research was to examine teachers' personal preferences for children differing in sociometric status. Although peer preferences have received considerable attention in the literature, teacher preference patterns have rarely been investigated. This issue is of interest in light of evidence that teacher preferences are related to their behavior in the classroom (Getzels & Jackson, 1962; Trickett, 1983). Accordingly, in this investigation, we obtained teacher ratings of their personal preference for popular, average, and rejected children. In addition, we examined the behavioral determinants of teacher preference.

Method

Subjects

Subjects for the study were 160 prekindergarten through fifth-grade children, including 78 boys and 82 girls. These children were drawn from all seven classrooms in a laboratory elementary school in northern Maryland. The sample was 62% white, 29% black, and 9% other minorities, and was heterogeneous in social class.

Procedure

Two measures were used to assess children's sociometric status--a friendship nomination measure on which children indicated the names of their three best friends in the classroom and a sociometric rating scale on which children rated how much they liked to play with each of their classmates. Prekindergarten, kindergarten, and first-grade children made

their sociometric play ratings using a three-point pictorial scale--a happy face, a neutral face, and a sad face. Second- through fifth-grade children gave their play ratings, using a five-point numerical scale. On each scale, a low score (sad face or "1" rating) meant the child did not like to play with that classmate at all, and a high score (happy face or "5" rating) meant that the child liked to play with that classmate a lot. Following a procedure developed by Asher and Dodge (1986), scores derived from the two sociometric measures were used to classify children within each classroom as popular (n=20), average (n=103), or rejected (n=27).

Each classroom teacher completed the Teacher-Child Rating Scale (T-CRS, Hightower, Work, Cowen, Lotyczewski, Spinell, Guare, & Rohrbeck, 1986) for each student in her classroom. The T-CRS is a measure of social-emotional adjustment of school-age children. The scale consists of 18 items pertaining to three types of school problem behaviors--acting-out, shy-anxious, and learning problems--and 24 items focusing on school competencies in four areas--frustration tolerance, assertive social skills, task orientation, and peer sociability. In addition to completing the T-CRS, teachers were asked to rate their personal preference for each child in their class, using a five-point scale, from most likeable (5) to least likeable (1). This measure was derived from O'Neill (1976) and Trickett (1983).

Results and Discussion

Sociometric status differences in teachers' ratings of children's school adjustment were examined separately for the younger (prekindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade) and older (second through fifth-grade) children in the sample, using oneway MANOVAs. For each age group, a significant multivariate *F* was found, and univariate *F* tests were significant for five of the seven T-CRS scales. Rejected as compared to popular and average-status children were rated by teachers as more acting-out, having more learning problems, and as being lower in assertive social skills, task orientation, and peer sociability (see Figures 1 and 2). These findings thus support previous research on the behavioral bases of peer status.

In contrast to the consistent behavioral pattern found for younger and older rejected children, the perceived behavioral characteristics of popular versus average-status children differed for the two age groups. Figure 1 shows that teachers consistently rated younger popular children as highly socially adjusted relative to their average-status counterparts. These differences were significant for the task orientation and sociability scales. For the older age group, however, no significant behavioral differences were found between the popular and average-status children. As can be seen in Figure 2, the behavioral profiles for the older popular and average-status children tended to be quite similar, with scores hovering around the mean. Overall, then, perceived behavioral

differences between popular and average-status children were greater in the younger as compared to the older age group. This finding is also consistent with the idea that the basis of popularity among older children may be more subtle and less readily observable than is the case for younger children (e.g., Asher & Renshaw, 1981).

Sociometric status differences in teachers' personal preferences were also assessed for each age group, using oneway ANOVAs and Student-Newman-Keuls post-hoc comparisons. Figure 3 shows that, for both age groups, children who were socially rejected by their peers were also least preferred by teachers. The teacher preference pattern for popular and average-status children differed for younger versus older children, however. In the younger age group, popular children were rated by teachers as most likeable, and both popular and average-status children were significantly preferred over rejected children. By contrast, in the older group, popular children were rated as less likeable than average-status children and were not significantly preferred over rejected children. Thus, for the younger as compared to the older sample, there tended to be a closer correspondence between teacher and peer preferences.

Stepwise regression analyses were conducted separately for the two age groups with the seven T-CRS scores as predictors of teacher preference (see Table 1). These results indicated that acting-out behavior was a significant negative predictor of teacher preference in both age groups. However, for younger

children, peer sociability was the strongest predictor of teacher preference. In the older group, frustration tolerance was the strongest predictor of teacher ratings of children's likeability. These findings suggest that teachers may have somewhat different personal expectations for younger as compared to older children. For younger children, teacher preference was more closely related to children's interpersonal relationship skills, whereas for older children, teacher preference was more influenced by the children's school and social coping skills. In future research, it will be important to determine the extent to which differences in teacher preference are associated with differences in teacher-child behavior and child outcomes in school.

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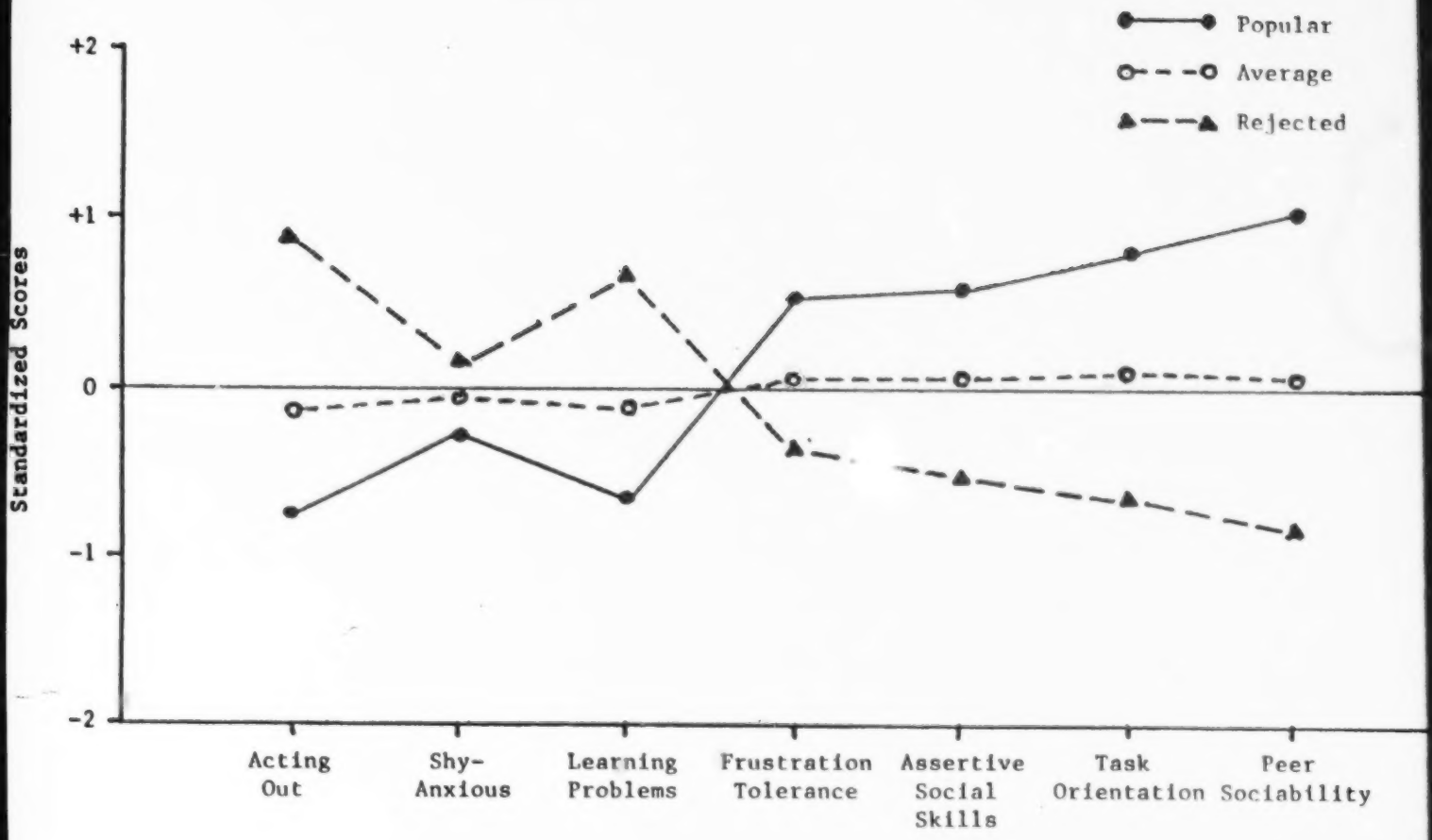

Figure 1. Scores on the Teacher-Child Rating Scale for popular, average, and rejected children in the younger group (preschool through first grades).

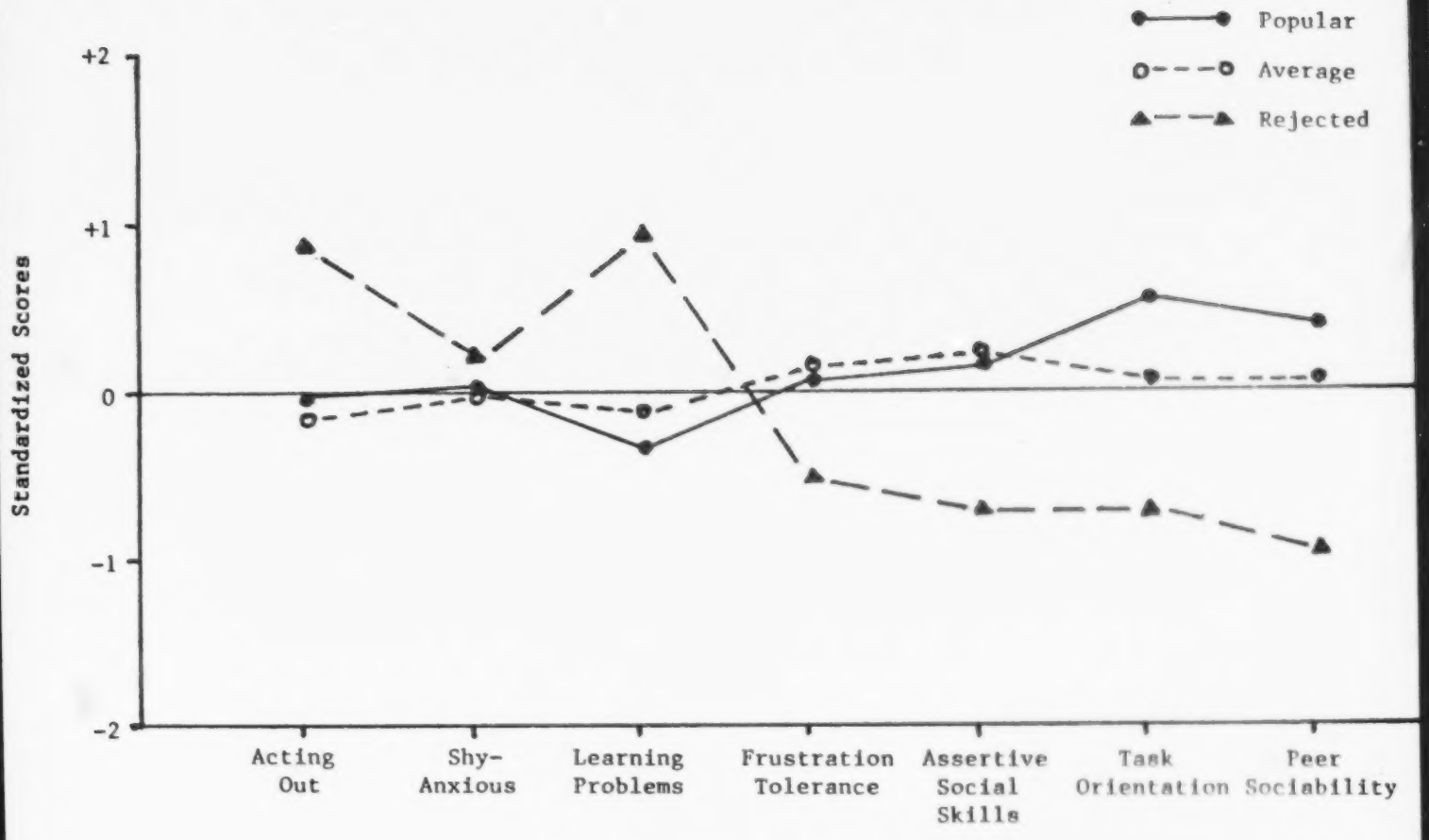

Figure 2. Scores on the Teacher-Child Rating Scale for popular, average, and rejected children in the older group (second through fifth grades).

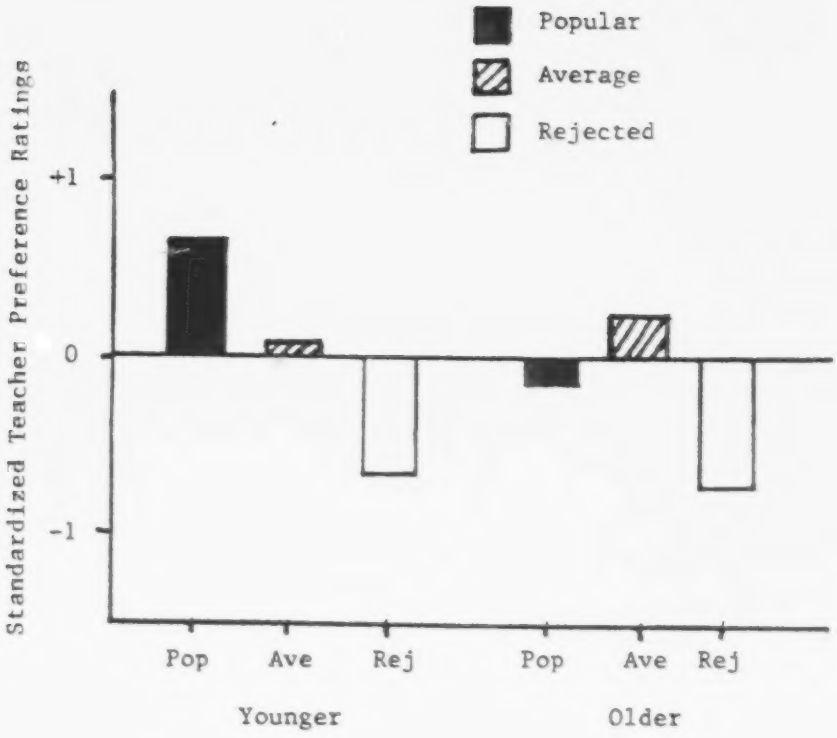

Figure 3. Teacher preference ratings for popular, average, and rejected children in the younger versus older group.

Table 1

Multiple Regressions of T-CRS Scores on Teacher Preference for Younger and Older Children

Variable	β	R^2	F
Younger Group (n=75)			
Peer Sociability	.35	.46	61.87***
Acting-Out	-.38	.54	11.97***
Assertiveness	.20	.56	4.74*
Older Group (n=85)			
Frustration Tolerance	.42	.42	59.01***
Acting Out	-.32	.47	8.18**

Note. F values are for R^2 change estimates.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.